

# REHABILITATION DEPARTMENT POSTNATAL EXERCISES AND ADVICE FOLLOWING THE BIRTH OF YOUR BABY

After the birth of your baby your body begins to readjust which can take up to three months. It is important that the muscles which have been stretched during pregnancy and birth should be strengthened by special exercises. This booklet offers some simple exercises and advice to aid your recovery. Start gently and then gradually progress.

**THESE EXERCISES SHOULD BE DONE FOR AT LEAST THE FIRST SIX WEEKS.**

## Circulation

When you have been sitting or lying down for a long period of time, your circulation is not working as well as it should. These exercises help to get things moving normally. It is important to do them before you get up after the baby is born and whenever you have been sitting or lying down for a while. If your feet or ankles are swollen, do the exercises with your legs raised on pillows.



## Exercise 1

- Push your feet down, and then pull them back up
- With your feet at right angles to your legs, bend your toes over and back
- Circle your feet round
- Bend and straighten one knee at a time, five times each. Repeat leg exercises every hour for two days

## Care of your stitches

The following will help ease the discomfort you are feeling and aid the healing of your stitches:

- When passing urine it may sting, so use a jug of water or hand held hose/shower on gentle flow to dilute the urine as you are voiding. Always clean from FRONT TO BACK to minimise the chance of infection
- Use a salt bath three to four times a day in the first couple of days after birth or you can sit for 15 minutes in a basin of warm water containing one to two tablespoons of salt
- Lie down and place a pillow under your hips. Elevating your hips helps reduce the swelling. Also, using an ice pack for 15 minutes every four hours will help to further reduce the swelling
- When opening your bowels use a small wad of tissue to provide support to your stitches and give you more confidence. Do not delay going to the toilet once you have an "urge" as it will only become more difficult. Remember to have enough fluids and a healthy diet to avoid constipation
- Do not use ring cushions as these can make the swelling worse

### **Breathing exercises**

This helps with abdominal breathing.

#### **Exercise 2**

- Lie with your head on the pillow and your knees up
- Place your hands halfway down your tummy, breathe in and feel your abdomen rise
- Breathe out completely, pulling your abdominal muscles towards your back. This squeezes out as much air as possible

### **Getting out of bed**

This is the best way to get out of bed to protect your back, pelvic floor and abdominal muscles following a caesarean section.

- Bend your knees and put your outside arm across your chest
- Roll on to your side by turning your head, and rotating your knees and trunk at the same time
- Push yourself up into side-sitting position by using your arms; at the same time put your legs over the edge of the bed

To get back into bed do these steps in reverse order.

### **Your pelvic floor**

The pelvic floor is a sling of muscle at the base of the pelvis that supports the pelvic organs, helps maintain bladder and bowel control, and maintains healthy sexual function. During pregnancy the hormones and the weight of the baby may have a weakening effect on the pelvic floor. Ongoing weakness can cause bladder or bowel control problems, or allow the pelvic organs to drop down (prolapse). One in three women who have ever had a baby wet themselves to some degree at various times. It is therefore recommended that all women exercise their pelvic floor muscles regularly throughout life.

#### **Exercise 3**

How to do pelvic floor exercises

In sitting or lying, imagine you are trying to stop your flow of urine, and at the same time trying to hold in wind.

- You should feel a 'squeeze and lift', as if closing and drawing up the front and back passages. This is a pelvic floor contraction
- Long holds: Try to hold this squeeze and lift for three seconds then relax completely. Repeat this three times. Breathe normally whilst doing these exercises. Relax for the count of four between each contraction
- Quick squeezes: Now carry out fast, strong pelvic floor contractions holding each squeeze and lift for only one second. Repeat three times. This is necessary for retraining the muscle to contract quickly when you cough, laugh or sneeze
- With practice, your muscle strength will improve. As you are able, gradually build up the holds and repetitions until you can hold for 10 seconds, 10 times

#### **Doing the exercises correctly**

It is important that these exercises are performed correctly, so that only the pelvic floor muscles are working. Check that you are not:

- Holding your breath
- Tightening your buttocks
- Squeezing your legs together
- Pulling in your tummy muscles too much (although you may feel a slight tightening of your lower tummy muscles)

These exercises can be done in any position, anywhere. Nothing on the outside of your body is moving, so nobody knows that you are doing them.

Do your pelvic floor muscle exercises at least three times daily. The difficult part of the exercises is remembering to do them. The more dedicated you are with the exercises, the more successful you will be.

To help yourself remember, develop a 'memory link', put a sticker on the fridge/kettle/computer, do them after going to the toilet or when you have a drink etc.

### Protecting your pelvic floor muscles

Now that you have had a baby, you need to strengthen your pelvic floor muscles and go on protecting them for life. Therefore, it is important to avoid things that will weaken them.

- Lifting or carrying heavy objects/children will increase the pressure down on the pelvic floor muscles and weaken them
- Contracting your pelvic floor muscles should be a lifelong habit. Gently pull in your lower belly muscles and hold while you bend, lift, carry heavy objects, cough, sneeze, lift weights, do sit-ups etc. Make sure that you breathe normally

### Correct position for opening your bowels

Pushing down as you try to use your bowels will weaken your pelvic floor muscles.

- Place your knees higher than your hips
- Lean forwards and put elbows on your knees
- Bulge out your abdomen keeping your spine straight
- Avoid constipation by drinking three litres of fluid each day while you are breastfeeding and at least two litres if you are not. A balanced diet high in fibre and fresh fruit and vegetables is also required

### Abdominal muscles

After having your baby your abdominal muscles are weakened and stretched so they are not providing adequate support for your back. During pregnancy your front abdominal muscles separate to allow for growth of your baby and so this “gap” needs to close (usually by four to six weeks) before your back will be properly supported again.

### Checking for the “gap”

Lie on your back with your knees bent. Use one hand to support your head whilst you press the fingers of the other hand deep across the middle of your abdomen above your belly button. Gently raise your head and shoulders off the bed towards a low sit up to generate some tension in the muscle. You may feel a gap between the muscle wall edges. The following gentle exercises will help to bring this gap together. Check in this way every one to two weeks as with exercise the gap should gradually become smaller.

#### IMPORTANT

Sit-ups are not recommended until this “gap” has either closed or has reduced to at least two finger widths and you can contract and hold your pelvic floor muscles during a sit-up.

#### IMPORTANT

Until your “gap” has closed (usually by four to six weeks), or is two fingers or less, continue these exercises and protect your abdominal muscles by getting in and out of bed as described.

### Easing backache and flattening your abdominal muscles

The abdominal muscles are very important as they reduce strain on your back and pelvic floor. They also act like a corset to stabilise your spine and pelvis, and help flatten your stomach.

#### Exercise 4

Core

This exercise can be done in other positions such as lying on your tummy or side, on hands and knees, sitting or standing.

- Let your tummy sag
- Breathe out and as you do, gently draw in your lower abdomen. Hold three to five seconds and relax
- Repeat this five times

Try to breathe normally as you do this exercise.

#### Exercise 5

Pelvic tilting

- Tighten pelvic floor and abdominal muscles as above
- Squeeze your buttocks together then flatten your lower back into the floor
- Hold for two to three seconds and repeat five times while breathing normally

These exercises should be done regularly and aim to increase the number of exercises to 10 repetitions and the hold to 10 seconds.

## Exercise 6

### Cross over

Lying keeping your head and feet relaxed on the bed (do not lift)

- Gently press your right hand against your left leg whilst pushing your left leg against your right hand
- Hold gently against each other for five seconds then relax
- Repeat five times. Repeat with other arm and leg. Do one to three sets each day. Alternatively this exercise can be done while sitting

### Progressing your abdominal exercises

ONLY after your gap has closed should you start sit-ups. Start with only three or four repetitions and then slowly and carefully progress to 10.

With every exercise breathe IN, do a pelvic floor contraction, pull in your lower tummy and tilt your pelvis back then:

#### • Low sit-ups

Lift head, tuck chin into chest and, as you breathe in, curl up taking hands towards your knees. Uncurl slowly as you breathe out

#### • Diagonals

Lift head, tuck chin into chest and, as you breathe in, curl across reaching both hands toward left knee. Uncurl slowly as you breathe out. Repeat to right knee

### Preventing backache and muscle strain

It is important to take care of your back after you have had your baby. This part of your body will be at risk of injury for four to six months after the birth due to hormonal changes making your joints more relaxed and weakened abdominal muscles that are not supporting the spine as normal.

Backache is usually due to weak muscles, poor posture, tiredness or bad working positions and can be avoided by making time for exercise and other daily activities.

If you have had an epidural it is common to have some back pain around the site where it was inserted for up to two weeks following the birth of your baby.

To protect your back, weakened abdominal muscles and your pelvic floor muscles it is important to do a pelvic floor contraction (squeeze and lift) then gently pull in your lower abdominal muscles and hold while you bend, lift, carry, lift weights, do sit-ups etc.

### Remember:

To help support your back and reduce back pain, refer to abdominal muscle exercises.

When caring for your new baby, take care of your back by:

- Carry loads evenly in both hands so you are not leaning or twisting to one side. Try not to carry other children on your hips for any length of time
- POSTURE: Standing 'tall' with your lower abdominal muscles pulled in and your bottom tucked under
- Sitting in a comfortable chair with good back support particularly when feeding your baby eg. pillow across your lower back. Once your baby is happily feeding make sure your arm is relaxed on a pillow and that your shoulders and neck are relaxed



Correct



Wrong

- After feeds, roll your shoulders in big slow circles backwards to ease upper back and neck tension. Then tilt your left ear to your left shoulder to gently stretch the right side of your neck, hold 20 seconds, relax and then repeat opposite side
- LIFTING: Try to avoid heavy lifting for at least six weeks. Remember to lift well with your back straight and your knees bent. Also, tightening your pelvic floor and lower abdominal muscles and hold the object firmly and close to your body



- Avoiding twisting movements by turning your feet in the direction of movement
- Avoid prolonged bending i.e. when changing baby by making sure that your working surfaces are at the waist height or you kneel down to keep your back straight
- It is important from day one to use your lower abdominal and back muscles to support your back rather than wearing a “binder”. As you are taking life more slowly during the first six weeks after giving birth your muscles have time to slowly regain their strength to support you. However, binders can be useful if you feel your tummy muscles have been over stretched or you have a large ‘gap’ in the abdominal muscles. In this situation the binder helps to bring the tummy muscle together so that you can do the exercises more effectively rather than replacing the exercise

**Back exercises:**

Begin with five of each and gradually progress to 10.

CAT: Kneel on hands and knees keeping back straight. As you breathe out, drop head and gently round lower back, stretching it up as you do a pelvic floor contraction and pull your lower abdomen in towards your spine. Relax slowly to return to starting position as you breathe in. DO NOT allow your back to hollow down.



**PELVIC ROLL:** Lie on your back with knees bent and together. Do a pelvic floor contraction then gently pull your lower abdominal muscles in towards your spine and hold. Slowly lower your knees to right. Return to centre. Repeat to left. Breathe normally during this exercise.



### **Return to exercise**

It is important to restore your general fitness as soon as possible. You will cope better with your busy life when fit.

- Walking is a safe exercise to gain fitness and stamina. Start a gentle walking programme; beginning with five to 10 minutes a day, you should be able to push the pram comfortably. Gradually increase as you feel your body is able. International guidelines recommend a minimum of 30 minutes exercise five days a week
- Swimming can be started from six weeks (if no blood loss). Avoid breaststroke if suffering from back or pubic pain
- Cycling can be started as soon as it is comfortable to sit on the bike seat
- Be careful returning to weight work at the gym, and more strenuous exercise such as pilates or yoga (except for classes specifically designed for women after giving birth). Returning to the gym should be a gradual process. Start slowly and only progress as your body feels able. At a minimum your abdominal muscle “gap” should be closed and your pelvic floor strength back to normal
- High impact exercise such as jogging, jumping and aerobics should be avoided for at least three months after delivery as the hormone changes leave your pelvic floor, abdominal and back muscles and other joints vulnerable to longer term damage. Start very gradually and listen to your body for warning signs
- If you feel you are having trouble losing your pregnancy weight then make an appointment to see the hospital dietician for a healthy eating plan

### **Eight to 12 weeks after the birth of your baby**

- Check again to see if the “gap” in your abdominal muscles has closed. If not or you are not sure, it should be checked by your doctor, midwife or physiotherapist
- It is now a good time to check to see how strong your pelvic floor muscles are by trying to stop the flow of urine midstream. You should be able to either completely or almost stop the flow of urine. Remember this is a test only; do not do your exercises this way
- Also try a stress test – with a reasonably full bladder do 20 jumps (legs slightly apart), four star jumps and three strong coughs. If you are dry you can gradually return to sporting activities but be guided by your own body
- Remember it may take three to four months for your pelvic floor muscles to regain their strength so continue your daily exercises and check again. If you are still concerned then it is important that you talk to your doctor or physiotherapist
- Once you feel your pelvic floor muscles are back to normal then ensure you maintain their strength (remember “use it or lose it”!)

**These should be a part of your daily routine – FOR LIFE!!**

### **Relaxation**

Adequate rest is needed to help your body recover and cope with a busy life. Try to make time every day to relax. This simple relaxation may help.

In a comfortable position, with back and head well supported and eyes closed, concentrate on slow deep breathing – breathe in and then breathe out as your breath takes any tension in your body with it.

- **Raise your eyebrows. Let go. Repeat**  
Your eyes should be gently closed, and your forehead smooth
- **Open your mouth wide. Let go. Repeat**  
The muscles around your jaw should feel relaxed, and your tongue should be resting loosely in the bottom of your mouth
- **Let your head and neck sink into the support**  
Think about your breathing again – slow breath in and out
- **Stretch your shoulders down by reaching towards your feet. Let go. Repeat**
- **Straighten your elbows. Let go. Repeat**
- **Stretch out your fingers and thumbs. Let go. Repeat**  
Your arms should feel heavy, with shoulders comfortable, elbows slightly bent and fingers relaxed
- **Let your body sink into the support**
- **Tighten your bottom and thigh muscles. Let go. Repeat**
- **Let your knees roll out slightly so that your legs feel comfortable**
- **Point your feet up towards you. Let go. Repeat**
- **Squeeze your toes. Let go. Repeat**
- **Let your body sink into the support, feeling every part relaxing**  
Think about your breathing – slowly breathing in and out

For further advice, please speak to your physiotherapist.